

"A Preliminary Defense of Kantian Prudence"

Patrick Paul Kain, Purdue University

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Abstract: Kant claims that there is an imperative of prudence based upon the fact that each finite rational being necessarily wills his own happiness, but this thesis appears to conflict with the account of ends Kant formulates in *Metaphysik der Sitten*. After elaborating the apparent problem this poses for Kant's conception of prudence, it is argued that Kant is committed to the idea of a necessarily possessed end independently of his account of prudence and that there is no special problem with the idea of happiness as a necessary end.

Prudence [*Klugheit*], Kant says in the *Grundlegung*, is "skill in the choice of means to one's own greatest well-being" or "the sagacity to combine all [one's own] purposes for his own lasting advantage".(G 416)¹ Kant claims that there is an "imperative that refers to the choice of means to one's own happiness", this imperative is what he refers to as the precept of prudence.(G416) Now since Kant thinks that "imperatives are only formulae expressing the relation of objective laws of volition in general to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being..."(G414) it would appear that Kant is also committed to the existence of what I will call the Principle of Prudence: an objective principle of volition guiding the exercise of prudence. Unfortunately, Kant devotes little attention to clearly formulating such a principle or to explaining its objective status.

This fact is not surprising, given that one of the major purposes of Kant's writings on moral philosophy is to critique the pretensions of empirical practical reason of which prudential reason is a big part. For one thing Kant himself raised several problems with the practice of prudential reasoning. The command to adopt effective means to one's own happiness seems to be of limited practical use: the requirement can guide action only to the degree that determinate

¹ In text citations are to Kant's works with the pagination of the appropriate volume of the *Akademie Ausgabe* (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*), with the exception of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, where pagination of the first and second editions is given [A/B]. G= *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, MdS= *Metaphysik der Sitten*, KpV= *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, R= *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, TP= "Über den *Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis*", KU= *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.

content can be given to the concept of happiness, a matter on which Kant's skepticism is well known. "Imperatives of prudence, strictly speaking, cannot command at all," he wrote, because "the problem of determining certainly and universally what action will promote the happiness of a rational being is completely insoluble."(G418)² In addition, Kant's moral theory, his account of pure practical reason, seems to imply that a moral agent only has reason to pursue his own happiness to the extent that this pursuit is consistent with obedience to the moral law. This has suggested to some commentators that, for Kant, prudence possesses no rational authority of its own.³

I am skeptical of this last suggestion. Moreover, it seems clear that in any event, Kant's practical philosophy cannot do without a positive account of prudential reason. For one thing, Kant's account of our duties of virtue presupposes the authority of prudential reason in at least two ways. First, Kant uses our commitment to prudential reason to identify the "ends that are duties". Second, the judgments we make in pursuit of these ends and while fulfilling our duties are supposed to be guided by prudence.⁴ Today, as a prolegomena to a more complete Kantian account of prudential reason, I will reconstruct some of the structural features of Kant's account of prudence and attempt to defend it against one important objection.⁵

² There are at least two issues here: the one is knowing what the happiness of a rational being consists in (the constituents), the others is knowing how to attain it, once its content is specified.

³ Along these lines, a number of recent interpreters, including Stephen Engstrom and Christine Korsgaard, have suggested (as Henry Allison has put it) that Kant holds that the moral law "functions as a source of the goodness of happiness in the sense of providing the reason to pursue it." Henry Allison, *Idealism and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 114. If taken as a conceptual truth about reasons, this thesis seems to imply that if an agent were not bound by the moral law (i.e. if she had no categorical reasons), she would have no reason to pursue her own happiness and, as a possible further consequence, no reasons to act at all. One contemporary development of this suggestion can be found in Michael Smith, "Internal Reasons," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 55 (1995), 109-131. This interpretation is not without its critics. Allison, for one, has apparently rejected such an interpretation of Kantian non-moral practical reason, suggesting that, according to Kant, "instrumental rationality has its own sphere and its own logic- I am almost tempted to say its own autonomy- which holds independently of any moral considerations." Allison, p.114. On Allison's interpretation, needs and desires provide a source of reasons to act that is not dependent upon the moral law. pp. 126,135. I have argued against the Korsgaard-Engstrom interpretation in *Self-legislation and Prudence in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, (dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1999), chapter 2.

⁴ MdS 433n.

⁵ It is important to note that, as Clemens Schwaiger has emphasized with me in conversation, Kant often concentrated his attention on the special difficulty and complexity involved in prudential, as opposed to merely "technical" reason, rather than the "structural features" I concentrate on here. Some of these other issues re-emerge toward the end of this paper.

Let us begin by considering why Kant thinks that prudence should be recognized as an objective rational requirement. Although he says relatively little about this issue, Kant does sketch the outlines of a potential answer.

To adopt [love as good will toward oneself] into one's maxim is natural (for who will not wish to have it always go well with him?); it is also rational so far as, on the one hand, that end is chosen which can accord with the greatest and most abiding welfare, and, on the other hand, the fittest means are chosen [to secure] each of the components of happiness. Here reason holds the place of a handmaid to natural inclination...(R45n.)

Of course Kant believes and is quick to add that prudence is not the only or the most dignified purpose of practical reason, that place is reserved for morality, but nevertheless, he emphasizes that, in a rational agent,

reason certainly has a commission from the side of his sensibility which it cannot refuse, to attend to its interest and to form practical maxims with a view to happiness in this life and, where possible, in a future life as well.(KpV61; cf. G395-96)

But how exactly is it that reason requires prudence?

Kant seems to connect the rationality of prudence with the idea that it is natural to adopt one's own happiness as a goal. In Kant's ethical writings, we find a number of closely related claims about the "natural" place of happiness. Sometimes Kant emphasizes that there is a natural desire for happiness. All humans are said to have of themselves "the strongest and deepest inclination [*Neigung*] toward happiness" so Kant refers to this as a universal desire.(G399) Happiness is "necessarily the desire [*Verlangen*] of every rational but finite being" and "an unavoidable determinant [*Bestimmungsgrund*] of the faculty of desire".(KpV25) Kant also speaks of the universal *wish* for happiness.(G418;KpV37;R125) (For Kant, wishing involves more than mere desiring, but does not entail willing.) But Kant goes beyond claiming that happiness is an object of desire, or a wish. He also suggests that every rational beings (or at least every finite rational being) wills his or her own happiness and that it is "the natural end [*Naturzweck*] all humans have"(G430), "an end [*Zweck*] every human has (by virtue of the impulse [*Antrieb*] of his nature)" which we all will unavoidably.(MdS386).⁶ Happiness, he says,

⁶ Some English translations may obscure the claim that we necessarily *will* our own happiness. At MdS386, for example, Kant uses the verb *wollen*, which Mary Gregor renders this as "want" rather than "will". *Practical Philosophy. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 517. Similarly at G414, 418 in James Ellington *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, (Indianapolis:

is an end [*Zweck*] all dependent rational beings have by natural necessity, “a purpose [*Absicht*] which can be presupposed *a priori* and with certainty as being present in each human because it belongs to his essence.”(G415-16)⁷ Happiness is “the subjective final end [*Endzweck*] of rational worldly beings” which they have “by virtue of having a nature dependent upon sensuous objects”.(R6n.) This end is something that finite rational beings cannot renounce.(TP278)

We will consider the precise meaning of Kant’s claim about the natural end of happiness in a bit more detail below; what I want to stress at this point is that Kant seems to derive his claim that prudence is an objective requirement of practical reason from the claim that finite rational beings necessarily will their own happiness. As he explains,

There is... one end that can be presupposed as actual for all rational beings (so far as they are dependent beings to whom imperatives apply); and thus there is one purpose which they not merely could have but that we can certainly presuppose that they all do have by a natural necessity, and this purpose is happiness. A hypothetical imperative which represents the practical necessity of an action as a means for the promotion of happiness is assertoric. It may be expounded not simply as necessary to an uncertain, merely possible purpose, but as necessary to a purpose which can be presupposed *a priori* and with certainty as being present in each human because it belongs to his essence. Now skill in the choice of means to one’s own greatest well-being can be called prudence in the narrowest sense. And thus the imperative that refers to the choice of means to one’s own happiness, i.e., the precept of prudence, still remains hypothetical; the action is commanded not absolutely but only as a means to a further purpose.(G 415-16)

Kant’s thought seems to be that *if* rational agents necessarily will their own happiness as an end and *if* they are rationally required to will the means to their ends, then it follows that agents are rationally required to will the means to their own happiness. In so far as they are rational, they will exercise skill in the choice of means. Prudence would be required by the application of the general requirement of the Hypothetical Imperative to the fact that agents necessarily will their own happiness. On this account, it is essential that agents *will* their own happiness, not simply desire it, since the hypothetical imperative commands us to take the means to our ends, the ends we will, not to take the means to everything that we desire.

Hackett, 1981), pp. 25, 28. Of course, in colloquial German, *wollen* can mean either; the question is whether in this context Kant is (or should be) using the term in a technical way, as he seems to be.

⁷ It is worth noting that in the first edition of the *Grundlegung*, it is claimed that this purpose belongs to each human’s “*Natur*” (nature), which second edition attributes to each human’s “*Wesen*” (essence).

There are certainly many questions we could raise about the details and plausibility of this account: What is happiness? How does the Kantian account inform prudential deliberation? How do prudential and moral reasoning fit together? And so on. Unfortunately, problems with the claim that agents necessarily will their own happiness often preclude any further investigation.

One familiar and apparently serious problem with this claim that happiness is a universally and necessarily possessed end: it appears inconsistent with Kant's general account of ends.⁸ In the *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Kant offers a general definition of an end. "An end is an object of the choice (of a rational being), through the representation of which choice is determined to an action to bring this object about."(Mds381;cf.384)⁹ The present problem arises from the idea that an end is "the object of choice." On its own, we might understand this phrase only as it is elaborated in the rest of the definition: an end is an object of choice in the sense that it is the object through the representation of which choice is determined and, if things go well, it is the object which is thereby produced. On this gloss, there is no commitment to the idea that an end attains its position in choice as a result of choice itself. But as the conception of ends is further elaborated, this reading is precluded. Kant's intention in the section from which this passage is taken is to introduce the central concept of the *Tugendlehre*: the concept of an end that is a duty, and to explain how it differs from the concept of juridical duties central to the *Rechtslehre*. The duties of the *Rechtslehre*, Kant explains, are duties which one may be compelled to fulfill. A duty to have an end, by contrast, is something which I cannot be compelled to fulfill because "I can never be constrained by others *to have an end*; only I myself can *make* something my end."(Mds381) The key here is that "constraint through natural means by the choice of another" is never sufficient to make something my end. Someone could use sanctions or threats to force me to behave in a certain way, but he cannot force me to adopt his

⁸ For example, see Christine Korsgaard, "Motivation, Metaphysics and the Value of the Self: A Reply to Ginsborg, Guyer and Schneewind," *Ethics*, 109 (1998), 49-66; p. 58.

⁹ Of course, while this definition of an end is well suited to cover ends that are goals, it does not encompass what Kant calls "ends-in-themselves", since they are not things *brought about by choice*. But, since happiness is not a candidate for an end-in-itself, this point about the general definition of "ends" need not detain us right now. For a helpful treatment of this issue, see the first section of Thomas Pogge, "Kant on Ends and the Meaning of Life," *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*, ed. Reath, Herman and Korsgaard, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

end or perform an action under his preferred description. These things must remain more or less up to me. But in establishing this point, Kant goes further and insists that “I can have no end without making it an end for myself. That would be self-contradictory, an act of freedom that is yet not free,”(MdS381) a point he reiterates just a few pages later.¹⁰

An end is an object of free choice, the representation of which determines it to an action (by which the object is brought about). Every action, therefore, has its end; and since no one can have an end without himself making the object of his choice into an end, to have any end of action whatsoever is an act of freedom on the part of the acting subject, not an effect of nature.(MdS384-5)

The problem, simply put, is that, on the one hand, Kant insists that ends become such by the free choice of an agent, not merely as an effect of (empirical) nature while, on the other hand, he seems to suggest that happiness is the end of all dependent rational beings and is so by necessity.¹¹ The problem would be acute enough if Kant asserted these apparently opposing theses in different works. It is exacerbated when we recognize that Kant seems to assert both theses side-by-side in the same work. In fact, the primary reason Kant offers for his claim that there must be ends that are duties, relies upon the thesis that finite rational beings all will their own happiness as an end.¹² The idea is that, in order to defend its practical influence against the influence of this natural end, pure practical reason must require the adoption of its *own* end as a counterweight.(MdS381) And Kant relies upon the idea that happiness is a universally possessed end to rule it out as a potential "end that is a duty". He argues that the idea that happiness is an end that is a duty is self-contradictory precisely because “what everyone already wills unavoidably, of his own accord [*unvermeidlich schon von selbst will*], does not come under the concept of duty, which is constraint to an end adopted reluctantly” and “his own happiness is an

¹⁰ Unfortunately, Gregor’s rendering of this passage is potentially misleading because she changes tense in an interpolation: “To have an end that I have not myself made an end...” p. 514.

¹¹ Thomas Hill notices this problem when he says “it is contrary to the doctrine of free will to say that men on all occasions necessarily *will* happiness as their end- that is, set themselves to pursue it.” “The Hypothetical Imperative,” *Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973), p.437n. In response, Hill suggests we take Kant to mean that everyone desires his own happiness by natural necessity, but not that he necessarily wills it. See also Hill, “Kant’s Theory of Practical Reason,” *The Monist*, 72 (1989), p. 382n.18. Hill suggests that we distinguish between “having an end” and “willing an end”, but we should note that this can not exactly correspond with Kant’s talk of “having an end” and “making something one’s end”, since, as we have seen above, Kant insists that one cannot have an end without making it an end.

¹² The other reason Kant offers here is that there cannot be a categorical imperative unless there are moral ends.(MdS385)

end that every human has (by virtue of the impulse of his nature).”(MdS386) Thus, the apparent problem with happiness as a natural end is not merely a problem in reconciling two competing theses from disparate parts of the Kantian corpus, but appears to be a glaring inconsistency at the heart of the opening pages of the *Tugendlehre*.

It is helpful to note, however, that the argument that the *Tugendlehre* is inconsistent on this point relies on a suppressed premise. What Kant maintains in the *Tugendlehre* is that happiness “is an end every human has (by virtue of the impulses of his nature)” and that happiness is something that each human “wills unavoidably”. Kant’s view is only explicitly self-contradictory if he insists that happiness is an end that finite rational agents have simply “as an effect of nature”, that is, without making it their end. It helpful to remember here that Kant does not think that *all* forms of necessity are inconsistent with practical spontaneity. It is the specter of complete causal determination by sensible inclinations rather than necessity in general that Kant is concerned about. The volitions of the holy will, for example, are necessarily (i.e., by their very nature or essence) in accord with the moral law. (This is why the holy will isn’t subject to *imperatives*.) “By its subjective constitution, [a holy will] can be determined only through the representation of the good,” but it is nevertheless free and spontaneous.(G414) While the idea of a necessarily possessed end may be troubling and difficult to grasp, it is something Kant is committed to independently of his conception of prudence. If we can make sufficient sense of how finite rational beings necessarily have their own happiness as an end without construing it only as a matter of sensible inclinations causally determining action or the adoption of ends, we will have at least established that there is no *special* incoherence in Kant’s idea of a principle of prudence.

At this point, then, it is necessary to briefly consider Kant’s conception of happiness. It must be recognized at the outset that, on Kant’s account, happiness is not a fully determinate end which is just given to us by our sensuous nature. Even if an agent’s happiness is best seen as some function (or partly a function) of his desires, Kant defends a rather plastic conception of human nature, according to which human inclinations change significantly over time as a consequence of previous choices and in response to experience, new information, and a myriad of

biological and social changes.¹³ The constituents of an agent's happiness are not "given" in the sense of being fixed and unalterable. Furthermore, Kant emphasizes a common feature of our practical life: our desires often come into conflict with one another.¹⁴ Someone with high blood pressure, for example, may have a desire to avoid foods high in sodium for the sake of his health, but he may still remain a devoted lover of beef jerky, Virginia ham, and salty potato chips. If some of my desires conflict, my happiness cannot coherently consist in the satisfaction of all of my desires; though it may consist in the satisfaction of a harmonized or systematized set of those desires.¹⁵ Especially in cases of conflicting desires, there is a task for reason: to harmonize and unify my various inclinations and ends in order to make my idea of happiness determinate and more coherent. As Kant wrote in the *Kanon* of the first *Kritik*, "in the precepts of prudence, the whole business of reason consists in uniting all the ends which are prescribed to us by our desires in the one single end, happiness, and in coordinating the means for attaining it."(A800/B828)¹⁶ However the content of happiness is ultimately determined, it need not be seen simply as the result of the causal interaction of sensible inclinations. An agent's determinate conception of happiness may be (to a significant degree at least) rationally determined, not just an effect of natural causes.

¹³ This is not, of course, to deny that there are also significant continuities in the life of an individual and reliable generalizations about humans as a species. See, for example, Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ G399; KpV61.

¹⁵ cf. KpV73; R58; A800/B828; G416. This is in apparent contrast to passages where Kant describes happiness as the satisfaction of *all* of one's inclinations. A806/B834; G399; KU434n. In chapter 2 of *Self-legislation and Prudence in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, I have argued that the "system conception" can be plausibly seen as a clarification of the position Kant intends to express in the latter passages. cf. Victoria Wike, *Kant on Happiness in Ethics*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 5ff. There may be some discomfort at referring to this view as a "system conception" since Kant does claim that happiness does not constitute a system except when it is connected with virtue.(A811/B839) But what Kant has in mind in that passage is the possibility of a world-system rather than a coherent system for the individual agent.

¹⁶ Few would doubt, I think, that reason does play some such a role in our practical life (though there will no doubt be disagreement about its scope). The basis of prudential reason's authority to play such a role is a deeper question that is beyond the scope of this paper. One interesting proposal might focus upon the unity of agency that prudential reason preserves or establishes. For an analogous theory of the basis of moral norms, see Korsgaard, "Self-constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant," *Journal of Ethics*, 3 (1999), pp. 1-29.

We should also note that Kant does not insist that a finite rational being's own happiness is the only end he is capable of having, nor that it is an end that he pursues in every action.¹⁷ For one, Kant insists that a moral agent, in addition to and in contrast to having her own happiness as an end, may adopt moral ends (such as her own perfection and the happiness of others) and act to pursue such ends even in the face of countervailing inclinations. Kant also seems to recognize that a finite rational agent might pursue non-moral ends that can be distinct from and even in conflict with his own happiness. We may, for example, pursue ends that we have not integrated into or subsumed under the idea of happiness. Moreover, as he notes, when a highly determinate desire is in conflict with our "fluctuating idea" of happiness, we often choose the determinate desire.(G399) The patient with high blood pressure often reaches for the beef jerky. Thus, the necessity involved in a finite rational being's having happiness as an end is less complete than the necessity involved in the holy will: the holy will always wills in accord with the moral law while the finite will often adopts and even pursues ends other than happiness. In both the case of the holy will and the case of the finite rational will, a will has an end which it is unable to un-make or completely repudiate, but it is not clear that that need be problematic in and of itself.

For Kant, happiness is both a natural desire of all finite rational beings and an end which all finite rational beings have. It is an end we find ourselves with and cannot help but care about. But this need not imply that it is not something that we *make*: the contents of happiness are determined by reason. Happiness is set as an (indeterminate) end independently of reason, but reason recognizes this end as (at least *prima facie*) legitimate and reason identifies its content, subsuming and synthesizing particular ends into a more determinate conception of happiness. This is part of the "commission... which [reason] cannot refuse."(KpV61)¹⁸

¹⁷ Kant suggests that happiness is an end that we can abstract from, but can never renounce.(TP 278) The argument of this paragraph also seems to count against attributing to Kant another familiar strategy- conceiving of happiness as simply whatever it is that one in fact pursues. Such a conception would evacuate the principle of prudence of virtually all of its normative force. Hill has claimed that if it were the case that people on every occasion necessarily set themselves to pursue their own happiness, this would be inconsistent with Kant's doctrine of free will. "The Hypothetical Imperative," p. 437.

¹⁸ I would like to thank Karl Ameriks, David Solomon, Phil Quinn, Felicitas Munzel, Paul Weithman, and the Calvin College Philosophy Department for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.